

IN THE DISTRICT COURT OF THE UNITED STATES
FOR THE DISTRICT OF SOUTH CAROLINA
ANDERSON/GREENWOOD DIVISION

Robby McElveen,)	Civil Action No. 8:12-cv-01340-TLW-JDA
)	
Plaintiff,)	
)	
vs.)	<u>REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION</u>
)	<u>OF MAGISTRATE JUDGE</u>
Carolyn W. Colvin, ¹)	
Commissioner of Social Security,)	
)	
Defendant.)	

This matter is before the Court for a Report and Recommendation pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 636(b)(1)(B) and Local Civil Rule 73.02(B)(2)(a), D.S.C. Plaintiff brought this action pursuant to 42 U.S.C. § 405(g) to obtain judicial review of a final decision of Defendant Commissioner of Social Security (“the Commissioner”), denying Plaintiff’s claim for disability insurance benefits (“DIB”). For the reasons set forth below, it is recommended that the decision of the Commissioner be reversed and the case be remanded to the Commissioner.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

In August 2009, Plaintiff filed an application for DIB, alleging an onset of disability date of July 1, 2009. [R. 67–75.] The claim was denied initially and on reconsideration by the Social Security Administration (“the Administration”). [R. 43–53.] On April 20, 2010, Plaintiff requested a hearing before an administrative law judge (“ALJ”) [R. 54–55], and on

¹Carolyn W. Colvin became the Acting Commissioner of Social Security on February 14, 2013. Pursuant to Rule 25(d) of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure, Carolyn W. Colvin should be substituted for Michael J. Astrue as Defendant in this suit. No further action need be taken to continue this suit by reason of the last sentence of § 205(g) of the Social Security Act, 42 U.S.C. § 405(g).

December 7, 2010, ALJ E. Lee Morgan conducted a de novo hearing on Plaintiff's claims [R. 21–42].

The ALJ issued a decision on January 27, 2011, finding Plaintiff not disabled under the Social Security Act ("the Act"). [R. 12–20.] At Step 1,² the ALJ found Plaintiff last met the insured status requirements of the Act on March 31, 2011 and that he had not engaged in substantial gainful activity since his alleged onset date of July 1, 2009. [R. 14, Findings 1 & 2.] At Step 2, the ALJ found Plaintiff had severe impairments of degenerative joint disease and left knee pain and a non-severe impairment of hypertension. [R. 14, Finding 3.] At Step 3, the ALJ found that Plaintiff did not have an impairment or combination of impairments that met or medically equaled one of the impairments listed in 20 C.F.R. Part 404, Subpart A, Appendix 1. [R. 14, Finding 4.]

Before addressing Step 4, Plaintiff's ability to perform his past relevant work, the ALJ found Plaintiff retained the residual functional capacity ("RFC") to perform the full range of medium work as defined in 20 C.F.R. § 404.1567(c). [R. 15, Finding 5.] Based on this RFC, the ALJ determined at Step 4 that Plaintiff could perform his past relevant work as a truck driver. [R. 17, Finding 6.] Thus, the ALJ concluded Plaintiff was not under a disability as defined by the Act from the alleged onset date of July 1, 2009 through the date of the ALJ's decision. [R. 17, Finding 7.]

²The five-step sequential analysis used to evaluate disability claims is discussed in the Applicable Law section, *infra*.

Plaintiff requested Appeals Council review of the ALJ's decision [R. 4–8], but the Appeals Council declined review [R. 1–3]. Plaintiff filed this action for judicial review on May 21, 2012.³ [Doc. 1.]

THE PARTIES' POSITIONS

Plaintiff contends the ALJ committed the following reversible errors:

1. the ALJ did not explain his RFC findings as required by Social Security Ruling ("SSR") 96-8p [Doc. 14 at 13–19; Doc. 19 at 1–3];
2. the ALJ failed to properly evaluate Plaintiff's credibility, specifically by failing to discuss the information required by SSR 96-7p [Doc. 14 at 19–21; Doc. 19 at 3–4]; and
3. the ALJ failed to properly analyze Plaintiff's ability to perform his past relevant work pursuant to SSR 82-62 and 20 C.F.R. § 404.1520 [Doc. 14 at 22–24; Doc. 19 at 4–5].

The Commissioner, on the other hand, contends the ALJ's decision is supported by substantial evidence. [See Doc. 16 at 7–16.] Specifically, the Commissioner contends the ALJ properly determined Plaintiff had the RFC to perform the full range of medium work [*id.* at 8–12] and properly considered Plaintiff's subjective complaints and reasonably found them not credible [*id.* at 12–15]. Further, the Commissioner argues that, given Plaintiff's RFC, the ALJ properly found Plaintiff could perform his past relevant work. [*Id.* at 15–16.]

STANDARD OF REVIEW

The Commissioner's findings of fact are conclusive if supported by substantial evidence. 42 U.S.C. § 405(g). Substantial evidence is more than a scintilla—i.e., the evidence must do more than merely create a suspicion of the existence of a fact and must

³On December 4, 2012, Plaintiff advised the Court that, on a subsequent application, he was approved for benefits as of February 2011. [Doc. 15.]

include such relevant evidence as a reasonable person would accept as adequate to support the conclusion. See *Richardson v. Perales*, 402 U.S. 389, 401 (1971) (quoting *Consolidated Edison Co. v. NLRB*, 305 U.S. 197, 229 (1938)); *Laws v. Celebrezze*, 368 F.2d 640, 642 (4th Cir. 1966) (citing *Woolridge v. Celebrezze*, 214 F. Supp. 686, 687 (S.D.W. Va. 1963)) (“Substantial evidence, it has been held, is evidence which a reasoning mind would accept as sufficient to support a particular conclusion. It consists of more than a mere scintilla of evidence but may be somewhat less than a preponderance. If there is evidence to justify a refusal to direct a verdict were the case before a jury, then there is ‘substantial evidence.’”).

Where conflicting evidence “allows reasonable minds to differ as to whether a claimant is disabled, the responsibility for that decision falls on the [Commissioner] (or the [Commissioner’s] designate, the ALJ),” not on the reviewing court. *Craig v. Chater*, 76 F.3d 585, 589 (4th Cir. 1996); see also *Edwards v. Sullivan*, 937 F.2d 580, 584 n.3 (11th Cir. 1991) (stating that where the Commissioner’s decision is supported by substantial evidence, the court will affirm, even if the reviewer would have reached a contrary result as finder of fact and even if the reviewer finds that the evidence preponderates against the Commissioner’s decision). Thus, it is not within the province of a reviewing court to determine the weight of the evidence, nor is it the court’s function to substitute its judgment for that of the Commissioner so long as the decision is supported by substantial evidence. *Laws*, 368 F.2d at 642; *Snyder v. Ribicoff*, 307 F.2d 518, 520 (4th Cir. 1962).

The reviewing court will reverse the Commissioner’s decision on plenary review, however, if the decision applies incorrect law or fails to provide the court with sufficient

reasoning to determine that the Commissioner properly applied the law. *Myers v. Califano*, 611 F.2d 980, 982 (4th Cir. 1980); see also *Keeton v. Dep’t of Health & Human Servs.*, 21 F.3d 1064, 1066 (11th Cir. 1994). Where the Commissioner’s decision “is in clear disregard of the overwhelming weight of the evidence, Congress has empowered the courts to modify or reverse the [Commissioner’s] decision ‘with or without remanding the cause for a rehearing.’” *Vitek v. Finch*, 438 F.2d 1157, 1158 (4th Cir. 1971) (quoting 42 U.S.C. § 405(g)). Remand is unnecessary where “the record does not contain substantial evidence to support a decision denying coverage under the correct legal standard and when reopening the record for more evidence would serve no purpose.” *Breeden v. Weinberger*, 493 F.2d 1002, 1012 (4th Cir. 1974).

The court may remand a case to the Commissioner for a rehearing under sentence four or sentence six of 42 U.S.C. § 405(g). *Sargent v. Sullivan*, 941 F.2d 1207 (4th Cir. 1991) (unpublished table decision). To remand under sentence four, the reviewing court must find either that the Commissioner’s decision is not supported by substantial evidence or that the Commissioner incorrectly applied the law relevant to the disability claim. See, e.g., *Jackson v. Chater*, 99 F.3d 1086, 1090–91 (11th Cir. 1996) (holding remand was appropriate where the ALJ failed to develop a full and fair record of the claimant’s residual functional capacity); *Brehem v. Harris*, 621 F.2d 688, 690 (5th Cir. 1980) (holding remand was appropriate where record was insufficient to affirm but was also insufficient for court to find the claimant disabled). Where the court cannot discern the basis for the Commissioner’s decision, a remand under sentence four may be appropriate to allow the Commissioner to explain the basis for the decision. See *Smith v. Heckler*, 782 F.2d 1176,

1181–82 (4th Cir. 1986) (remanding case where decision of ALJ contained “a gap in its reasoning” because ALJ did not say he was discounting testimony or why); *Gordon v. Schweiker*, 725 F.2d 231, 235 (4th Cir. 1984) (remanding case where neither the ALJ nor the Appeals Council indicated the weight given to relevant evidence). On remand under sentence four, the ALJ should review the case on a complete record, including any new material evidence. See *Smith*, 782 F.2d at 1182 (“The [Commissioner] and the claimant may produce further evidence on remand.”). After a remand under sentence four, the court enters a final and immediately appealable judgment and then loses jurisdiction. *Sargent*, 941 F.2d 1207 (citing *Melkonyan v. Sullivan*, 501 U.S. 89, 102 (1991)).

In contrast, sentence six provides:

The court may . . . at any time order additional evidence to be taken before the Commissioner of Social Security, but only upon a showing that there is new evidence which is material and that there is good cause for the failure to incorporate such evidence into the record in a prior proceeding

42 U.S.C. § 405(g). A reviewing court may remand a case to the Commissioner on the basis of new evidence only if four prerequisites are met: (1) the evidence is relevant to the determination of disability at the time the application was first filed; (2) the evidence is material to the extent that the Commissioner’s decision might reasonably have been different had the new evidence been before him; (3) there is good cause for the claimant’s failure to submit the evidence when the claim was before the Commissioner; and (4) the claimant made at least a general showing of the nature of the new evidence to the reviewing court. *Borders v. Heckler*, 777 F.2d 954, 955 (4th Cir. 1985) (citing 42 U.S.C. § 405(g)); *Mitchell v. Schweiker*, 699 F.2d 185, 188 (4th Cir. 1983); *Sims v. Harris*, 631 F.2d

26, 28 (4th Cir. 1980); *King v. Califano*, 599 F.2d 597, 599 (4th Cir. 1979)), superseded by amendment to statute, 42 U.S.C. § 405(g), as recognized in *Wilkins v. Sec'y, Dep't of Health & Human Servs.*, 925 F.2d 769, 774 (4th Cir. 1991).⁴ With remand under sentence six, the parties must return to the court after remand to file modified findings of fact. *Melkonyan*, 501 U.S. at 98. The reviewing court retains jurisdiction pending remand and does not enter a final judgment until after the completion of remand proceedings. See *Allen v. Chater*, 67 F.3d 293 (4th Cir. 1995) (unpublished table decision) (holding that an order remanding a claim for Social Security benefits pursuant to sentence six of 42 U.S.C. § 405(g) is not a final order).

APPLICABLE LAW

The Act provides that disability benefits shall be available to those persons insured for benefits, who are not of retirement age, who properly apply, and who are under a disability. 42 U.S.C. § 423(a). “Disability” is defined as:

the inability to engage in any substantial gainful activity by reason of any medically determinable physical or mental impairment which can be expected to result in death or which has lasted or can be expected to last for a continuous period of not less than 12 consecutive months.

Id. § 423(d)(1)(A).

⁴ Though the court in *Wilkins* indicated in a parenthetical that the four-part test set forth in *Borders* had been superseded by an amendment to 42 U.S.C. § 405(g), courts in the Fourth Circuit have continued to cite the requirements outlined in *Borders* when evaluating a claim for remand based on new evidence. See, e.g., *Brooks v. Astrue*, No. 6:10-cv-152, 2010 WL 5478648, at *8 (D.S.C. Nov. 23, 2010); *Ashton v. Astrue*, No. TMD 09-1107, 2010 WL 3199345, at *3 (D. Md. Aug. 12, 2010); *Washington v. Comm'r of Soc. Sec.*, No. 2:08-cv-93, 2009 WL 86737, at *5 (E.D. Va. Jan. 13, 2009); *Brock v. Sec'y of Health & Human Servs.*, 807 F. Supp. 1248, 1250 n.3 (S.D.W. Va. 1992). Further, the Supreme Court of the United States has not suggested *Borders*’ construction of § 405(g) is incorrect. See *Sullivan v. Finkelstein*, 496 U.S. 617, 626 n.6 (1990). Accordingly, the Court will apply the more stringent *Borders* inquiry.

I. The Five Step Evaluation

To facilitate uniform and efficient processing of disability claims, federal regulations have reduced the statutory definition of disability to a series of five sequential questions. See, e.g., *Heckler v. Campbell*, 461 U.S. 458, 461 n.2 (1983) (noting a “need for efficiency” in considering disability claims). The ALJ must consider whether (1) the claimant is engaged in substantial gainful activity; (2) the claimant has a severe impairment; (3) the impairment meets or equals an impairment included in the Administration’s Official Listings of Impairments found at 20 C.F.R. Pt. 404, Subpt. P, App. 1; (4) the impairment prevents the claimant from performing past relevant work; and (5) the impairment prevents the claimant from having substantial gainful employment. 20 C.F.R. § 404.1520. Through the fourth step, the burden of production and proof is on the claimant. *Grant v. Schweiker*, 699 F.2d 189, 191 (4th Cir. 1983). The claimant must prove disability on or before the last day of her insured status to receive disability benefits. *Everett v. Sec'y of Health, Educ. & Welfare*, 412 F.2d 842, 843 (4th Cir. 1969). If the inquiry reaches step five, the burden shifts to the Commissioner to produce evidence that other jobs exist in the national economy that the claimant can perform, considering the claimant’s age, education, and work experience. *Grant*, 699 F.2d at 191. If at any step of the evaluation the ALJ can find an individual is disabled or not disabled, further inquiry is unnecessary. 20 C.F.R. § 404.1520(a); *Hall v. Harris*, 658 F.2d 260, 264 (4th Cir. 1981).

A. Substantial Gainful Activity

“Substantial gainful activity” must be both substantial—Involves doing significant physical or mental activities, 20 C.F.R. § 404.1572(a)—and gainful—done for pay or profit, whether or not a profit is realized, *id.* § 404.1572(b). If an individual has earnings from employment or self-employment above a specific level set out in the regulations, he is generally presumed to be able to engage in substantial gainful activity. *Id.* §§ 404.1574–1575.

B. Severe Impairment

An impairment is “severe” if it significantly limits an individual’s ability to perform basic work activities. See *id.* § 404.1521. When determining whether a claimant’s physical and mental impairments are sufficiently severe, the ALJ must consider the combined effect of all of the claimant’s impairments. 42 U.S.C. § 423(d)(2)(B). The ALJ must evaluate a disability claimant as a whole person and not in the abstract, having several hypothetical and isolated illnesses. *Walker v. Bowen*, 889 F.2d 47, 49–50 (4th Cir. 1989) (stating that, when evaluating the effect of a number of impairments on a disability claimant, “the [Commissioner] must consider the combined effect of a claimant’s impairments and not fragmentize them”). Accordingly, the ALJ must make specific and well-articulated findings as to the effect of a combination of impairments when determining whether an individual is disabled. *Id.* at 50 (“As a corollary to this rule, the ALJ must adequately explain his or her evaluation of the combined effects of the impairments.”). If the ALJ finds a

combination of impairments to be severe, “the combined impact of the impairments shall be considered throughout the disability determination process.” 42 U.S.C. § 423(d)(2)(B).

C. *Meets or Equals an Impairment Listed in the Listings of Impairments*

If a claimant’s impairment or combination of impairments meets or medically equals the criteria of a listing found at 20 C.F.R. Pt. 404, Subpt. P, App.1 and meets the duration requirement found at 20 C.F.R. § 404.1509, the ALJ will find the claimant disabled without considering the claimant’s age, education, and work experience. 20 C.F.R. § 404.1520(d).

D. *Past Relevant Work*

The assessment of a claimant’s ability to perform past relevant work “reflect[s] the statute’s focus on the functional capacity retained by the claimant.” *Pass v. Chater*, 65 F.3d 1200, 1204 (4th Cir. 1995). At this step of the evaluation, the ALJ compares the claimant’s residual functional capacity⁵ with the physical and mental demands of the kind of work he has done in the past to determine whether the claimant has the residual functional capacity to do his past work. 20 C.F.R. § 404.1560(b).

E. *Other Work*

As previously stated, once the ALJ finds that a claimant cannot return to her prior work, the burden of proof shifts to the Commissioner to establish that the claimant could perform other work that exists in the national economy. See *Hunter v. Sullivan*, 993 F.2d 31, 35 (4th Cir. 1992); 20 C.F.R. § 404.1520(f)–(g). To meet this burden, the

⁵Residual functional capacity is “the most [a claimant] can still do despite [his] limitations.” 20 C.F.R. § 404.1545(a).

Commissioner may sometimes rely exclusively on the Medical-Vocational Guidelines (the “grids”). Exclusive reliance on the “grids” is appropriate where the claimant suffers primarily from an exertional impairment, without significant nonexertional factors.⁶ 20 C.F.R. Pt. 404, Subpt. P, App. 2, § 200.00(e); see also *Gory v. Schweiker*, 712 F.2d 929, 930–31 (4th Cir. 1983) (stating that exclusive reliance on the grids is appropriate in cases involving exertional limitations). When a claimant suffers from both exertional and nonexertional limitations, the grids may serve only as guidelines. *Gory*, 712 F.2d at 931. In such a case, the Commissioner must use a vocational expert to establish the claimant’s ability to perform other work. 20 C.F.R. § 404.1569a; see *Walker*, 889 F.2d at 49–50 (“Because we have found that the grids cannot be relied upon to show conclusively that claimant is not disabled, when the case is remanded it will be incumbent upon the [Commissioner] to prove by expert vocational testimony that despite the combination of exertional and nonexertional impairments, the claimant retains the ability to perform specific jobs which exist in the national economy.”). The purpose of using a vocational expert is “to assist the ALJ in determining whether there is work available in the national economy which this particular claimant can perform.” *Walker*, 889 F.2d at 50. For the vocational expert’s testimony to be relevant, “it must be based upon a consideration of all

⁶An exertional limitation is one that affects the claimant’s ability to meet the strength requirements of jobs. 20 C.F.R. § 404.1569a(a). A nonexertional limitation is one that affects the ability to meet the demands of the job other than the strength demands. *Id.* Examples of nonexertional limitations include but are not limited to difficulty functioning because of being nervous, anxious, or depressed; difficulty maintaining attention or concentrating; difficulty understanding or remembering detailed instructions; difficulty seeing or hearing. § 404.1569a(c)(1).

other evidence in the record, . . . and it must be in response to proper hypothetical questions which fairly set out all of claimant's impairments." *Id.* (citations omitted).

II. Developing the Record

The ALJ has a duty to fully and fairly develop the record. See *Cook v. Heckler*, 783 F.2d 1168, 1173 (4th Cir. 1986). The ALJ is required to inquire fully into each relevant issue. *Snyder*, 307 F.2d at 520. The performance of this duty is particularly important when a claimant appears without counsel. *Marsh v. Harris*, 632 F.2d 296, 299 (4th Cir. 1980). In such circumstances, "the ALJ should scrupulously and conscientiously probe into, inquire of, and explore for all the relevant facts, . . . being especially diligent in ensuring that favorable as well as unfavorable facts and circumstances are elicited." *Id.* (internal quotations and citations omitted).

III. Treating Physicians

If a treating physician's opinion on the nature and severity of a claimant's impairments is "well-supported by medically acceptable clinical and laboratory diagnostic techniques and is not inconsistent with the other substantial evidence" in the record, the ALJ must give it controlling weight. 20 C.F.R. § 404.1527(c)(2); see *Mastro v. Apfel*, 270 F.3d 171, 178 (4th Cir. 2001). The ALJ may discount a treating physician's opinion if it is unsupported or inconsistent with other evidence, i.e., when the treating physician's opinion does not warrant controlling weight, *Craig*, 76 F.3d at 590, but the ALJ must nevertheless assign a weight to the medical opinion based on the 1) length of the treatment relationship and the frequency of examination; 2) nature and extent of the treatment relationship; 3)

supportability of the opinion; 4) consistency of the opinion with the record a whole; 5) specialization of the physician; and 6) other factors which tend to support or contradict the opinion, 20 C.F.R. § 404.1527(c). Similarly, where a treating physician has merely made conclusory statements, the ALJ may afford the opinion such weight as is supported by clinical or laboratory findings and other consistent evidence of a claimant's impairments. See *Craig*, 76 F.3d at 590 (holding there was sufficient evidence for the ALJ to reject the treating physician's conclusory opinion where the record contained contradictory evidence).

In any instance, a treating physician's opinion is generally entitled to more weight than a consulting physician's opinion. See *Mitchell v. Schweiker*, 699 F.2d 185, 187 (4th Cir. 1983) (stating that treating physician's opinion must be accorded great weight because "it reflects an expert judgment based on a continuing observation of the patient's condition for a prolonged period of time"); 20 C.F.R. § 404.1527(c)(2). An ALJ determination coming down on the side of a non-examining, non-treating physician's opinion can stand only if the medical testimony of examining and treating physicians goes both ways. *Smith v. Schweiker*, 795 F.2d 343, 346 (4th Cir. 1986). Further, the ALJ is required to review all of the medical findings and other evidence that support a medical source's statement that a claimant is disabled. 20 C.F.R. § 404.1527(d). However, the ALJ is responsible for making the ultimate determination about whether a claimant meets the statutory definition of disability. *Id.*

IV. Medical Tests and Examinations

The ALJ is required to order additional medical tests and exams only when a claimant's medical sources do not give sufficient medical evidence about an impairment to determine whether the claimant is disabled. 20 C.F.R. § 404.1517; see also *Conley v. Bowen*, 781 F.2d 143, 146 (8th Cir. 1986). The regulations are clear: a consultative examination is not required when there is sufficient medical evidence to make a determination on a claimant's disability. 20 C.F.R. § 404.1517. Under the regulations, however, the ALJ may determine that a consultative examination or other medical tests are necessary. *Id.*

V. Pain

Congress has determined that a claimant will not be considered disabled unless he furnishes medical and other evidence (e.g., medical signs and laboratory findings) showing the existence of a medical impairment that could reasonably be expected to produce the pain or symptoms alleged. 42 U.S.C. § 423(d)(5)(A). In evaluating claims of disabling pain, the ALJ must proceed in a two-part analysis. *Morgan v. Barnhart*, 142 F. App'x 716, 723 (4th Cir. 2005) (unpublished opinion). First, "the ALJ must determine whether the claimant has produced medical evidence of a 'medically determinable impairment which could reasonably be expected to produce . . . the actual pain, in the amount and degree, alleged by the claimant.'" *Id.* (quoting *Craig*, 76 F.3d at 594). Second, "if, and only if, the ALJ finds that the claimant has produced such evidence, the ALJ must then determine, as

a matter of fact, whether the claimant's underlying impairment *actually* causes her alleged pain." *Id.* (emphasis in original) (citing *Craig*, 76 F.3d at 595).

Under the "pain rule" applicable within the United States Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit, it is well established that "subjective complaints of pain and physical discomfort could give rise to a finding of total disability, even when those complaints [a]re not supported fully by objective observable signs." *Coffman v. Bowen*, 829 F.2d 514, 518 (4th Cir. 1987) (citing *Hicks v. Heckler*, 756 F.2d 1022, 1023 (4th Cir. 1985)). The ALJ must consider all of a claimant's statements about his symptoms, including pain, and determine the extent to which the symptoms can reasonably be accepted as consistent with the objective medical evidence. 20 C.F.R. § 404.1528. Indeed, the Fourth Circuit has rejected a rule which would require the claimant to demonstrate objective evidence of the pain itself, *Jenkins v. Sullivan*, 906 F.2d 107, 108 (4th Cir. 1990), and ordered the Commissioner to promulgate and distribute to all administrative law judges within the circuit a policy stating Fourth Circuit law on the subject of pain as a disabling condition, *Hyatt v. Sullivan*, 899 F.2d 329, 336–37 (4th Cir. 1990). The Commissioner thereafter issued the following "Policy Interpretation Ruling":

This Ruling supersedes, only in states within the Fourth Circuit (North Carolina, South Carolina, Maryland, Virginia and West Virginia), Social Security Ruling (SSR) 88-13, Titles II and XVI: Evaluation of Pain and Other Symptoms:

...

FOURTH CIRCUIT STANDARD: Once an underlying physical or [m]ental impairment that could reasonably be expected to cause pain is shown by medically acceptable objective evidence, such as clinical or laboratory diagnostic techniques, the adjudicator must evaluate the disabling effects

of a disability claimant's pain, even though its intensity or severity is shown only by subjective evidence. If an underlying impairment capable of causing pain is shown, subjective evidence of the pain, its intensity or degree can, by itself, support a finding of disability. Objective medical evidence of pain, its intensity or degree (i.e., manifestations of the functional effects of pain such as deteriorating nerve or muscle tissue, muscle spasm, or sensory or motor disruption), if available, should be obtained and considered. Because pain is not readily susceptible of objective proof, however, the absence of objective medical evidence of the intensity, severity, degree or functional effect of pain is not determinative.

SSR 90-1p, 55 Fed. Reg. 31,898-02, at 31,899 (Aug. 6, 1990). SSR 90-1p has since been superseded by SSR 96-7p, which is consistent with SSR 90-1p. See SSR 96-7p, 61 Fed. Reg. 34,483-01 (July 2, 1996). SSR 96-7p provides, "If an individual's statements about pain or other symptoms are not substantiated by the objective medical evidence, the adjudicator must consider all of the evidence in the case record, including any statements by the individual and other persons concerning the individual's symptoms." *Id.* at 34,485; see also 20 C.F.R. § 404.1529(c)(1)–(c)(2) (outlining evaluation of pain).

VI. Credibility

The ALJ must make a credibility determination based upon all the evidence in the record. Where an ALJ decides not to credit a claimant's testimony about pain, the ALJ must articulate specific and adequate reasons for doing so, or the record must be obvious as to the credibility finding. *Hammond v. Heckler*, 765 F.2d 424, 426 (4th Cir. 1985). Although credibility determinations are generally left to the ALJ's discretion, such determinations should not be sustained if they are based on improper criteria. *Breeden*, 493 F.2d at 1010 ("We recognize that the administrative law judge has the unique

advantage of having heard the testimony firsthand, and ordinarily we may not disturb credibility findings that are based on a witness's demeanor. But administrative findings based on oral testimony are not sacrosanct, and if it appears that credibility determinations are based on improper or irrational criteria they cannot be sustained.").

APPLICATION AND ANALYSIS

The ALJ's RFC Assessment

Plaintiff argues the ALJ failed to explain his RFC assessment, and thus, the ALJ's decision must be reversed and remanded for further evaluation. [Doc. 14 at 13–19.] Specifically, Plaintiff contends the ALJ failed to explain how he determined Plaintiff could stand and walk without limitation, and the ALJ failed to indicate whether he considered and weighed all relevant evidence. [*Id.* at 17–18; see also Doc. 19 at 1–3 (arguing the ALJ failed to discuss evidence that contradicted his findings).] Plaintiff argues "the medical evidence largely supported a finding that [Plaintiff] had conditions that would substantially restrict his ability to stand and walk throughout a normal workday," which would limit him to a range of sedentary work for which the Medical-Vocational Guidelines would direct a finding of disabled. [Doc. 14 at 18.] The Commissioner contends the ALJ expressly stated that he carefully considered the entire record and was not required to discuss every piece of evidence and that the ALJ's RFC assessment is supported by substantial evidence. [Doc. 16 at 8–12.]

The Administration has provided a definition of residual functional capacity ("RFC") and explained what a RFC assessment accomplishes:

RFC is what an individual can still do despite his or her limitations. RFC is an administrative assessment of the extent

to which an individual's medically determinable impairment(s), including any related symptoms, such as pain, may cause physical or mental limitations or restrictions that may affect his or her capacity to do work-related physical and mental activities. Ordinarily, RFC is the individual's maximum remaining ability to do sustained work activities in an ordinary work setting on a regular and continuing basis, and the RFC assessment must include a discussion of the individual's abilities on that basis. A "regular and continuing basis" means 8 hours a day, for 5 days a week, or an equivalent work schedule. . . .

SSR 96-8p, 61 Fed. Reg. 34,474–01, at 34,475 (July 2, 1996) (internal citation and footnotes omitted). Here, "[a]fter careful consideration of the entire record," the ALJ determined Plaintiff retained the RFC to perform medium work as defined in 20 C.F.R. § 404.1567(c). [R. 15.] Thus, the ALJ found Plaintiff was capable of performing work involving "lifting no more than 50 pounds at a time with frequent lifting or carrying of objects weighing up to 25 pounds." 20 C.F.R. § 404.1567(c). The Administration has also explained that

[m]ost medium jobs, like most light jobs, require the worker to stand or walk most of the time. Also, as in light work, most unskilled medium jobs require gross use of the hands to grasp, hold, and turn objects rather than use of the fingers for fine movements of small objects. Medium work is distinct from the less strenuous levels in the activities needed to accomplish the considerable lifting and carrying involved for the full range of medium work. A maximum of 50 pounds may be lifted at a time, with frequent lifting or carrying of objects weighing up to 25 pounds. (Frequent in this context means from one-third to two-thirds of the workday.) Consequently, to perform the full range of medium work as defined, a person must be able to do both frequent stooping and frequent crouching--bending both the back and the legs--in order to move objects from one level to another or to move the objects near foot level. While individual occupations classified as medium work vary in exertional demands from just above the light work requirements to the full range of medium work, any limitation of these functional abilities must be considered very carefully

to determine its impact on the size of the remaining occupational base of a person who is otherwise found capable of medium work.

In jobs at the medium level of exertion, there is more likelihood than in light work that such factors as the ability to ascend or descend ladders and scaffolding, kneel, and crawl will be a part of the work requirement. However, limitations of these activities would not significantly affect the occupational base.

SSR 83-14, 1983 WL 31254, at *5 (1983).

Conflicting Evidence

To assess a claimant's RFC, the ALJ must consider all relevant evidence in the record, including medical history, medical signs, laboratory findings, lay evidence, and medical source statements. SSR 96-8p, 61 Fed. Reg. at 34,477. SSR 96-8p specifically states, “[t]he RFC assessment must always consider and address medical source opinions. If the RFC assessment conflicts with an opinion from a medical source, the adjudicator must explain why the opinion was not adopted.” *Id.* at 34,478. The ALJ must also consider the degree to which any non-exertional limitations may further erode a claimant's ability to work:

Nonexertional capacity considers all work-related limitations and restrictions that do not depend on [a claimant]'s physical strength; i.e., all physical limitations and restrictions that are not reflected in the seven strength demands, and mental limitations and restrictions. It assesses [a claimant]'s abilities to perform physical activities such as postural (e.g., stooping, climbing), manipulative (e.g., reaching, handling), visual (seeing), communicative (hearing, speaking), and mental (e.g., understanding and remembering instructions and responding appropriately to supervision). In addition to these activities, it also considers the ability to tolerate various environmental factors (e.g., tolerance of temperature extremes).

As with exertional capacity, nonexertional capacity must be expressed in terms of work-related functions Work-related

mental activities generally required by competitive, remunerative work include the abilities to: understand, carry out, and remember instructions; use judgment in making work-related decisions; respond appropriately to supervision, co-workers and work situations; and deal with changes in a routine work setting.

Id. at 34,476.

After discussing some of the medical evidence related to Plaintiff's degenerative joint disease and knee pain and noting some of Plaintiff's hearing testimony, the ALJ noted the evidence did not show circulatory compromise, neurological deficits, persisting muscle spasms, fasciculations, fibrillations, or muscle atrophy or dystrophy often associated with long-standing severe or intense pain or physical inactivity. [R. 16.] However, the ALJ failed to specifically address findings from one of Plaintiff's treating physicians that Plaintiff had recurvatum with a back knee gait on the left and exhibited 3 out of 5 hamstring weakness on the left, 3 out of 5 anterior tibial weakness at the ankle, and passive dorsiflexion of the left ankle to neutral. [R. 177.] The ALJ also omitted treating physician findings that Plaintiff walked with an antalgic gait and that neurological sensory testing revealed decreased sensation to light touch and pin prick in the left L4-5 sensory dermatome. [R. 205.] Further, while the ALJ mentioned some of the findings from a July 2010 examination [R. 16], the ALJ omitted the notations that Plaintiff showed signs of wasting of the left leg; decreased pin-prick, touch, and temperature sensation up to the left knee joint; mild foot drop; and a tendency to drag the left foot when walking [R. 179]. Moreover, the ALJ indicated a consultative evaluation revealed Plaintiff walked with a limp but did not use a cane for ambulation [R. 15], but there is a note from the consultative evaluation that Plaintiff was using a crutch [R. 160], and on at least one occasion, Plaintiff's

treating physician noted Plaintiff was using a cane in his left hand to aid in ambulation [R. 175]. The findings omitted by the ALJ appear inconsistent with the ALJ's conclusion that there was no evidence of neurological deficits or muscle atrophy, and the ALJ's misstatement regarding Plaintiff's use of a cane appears inconsistent with the ALJ's conclusion that Plaintiff could perform the walking and standing requirements of medium work.

It is the duty of the ALJ to resolve conflicts in the evidence of record. *Hays v. Sullivan*, 907 F.2d 1453, 1456 (1990). However, without a discussion of the conflicting evidence, it is difficult for a reviewing court to (1) track the ALJ's reasoning and be assured that all record evidence was considered and (2) understand how the ALJ resolved conflicts in the evidence. See *Mellan v. Asture*, No. 4:08-2110-MBS, 2009 WL 2777653, at *13 (D.S.C. Aug. 31, 2009) ("[S]o long as the narrative opinion is sufficient[ly] detailed and cogent on the ultimate issues for the reviewing court to follow the ALJ's logic and reasoning and supported by substantial evidence in the record, then the lack of specific findings on more subordinate issues . . . does not require reversal." (emphasis added)). Further, the responsibility for weighing evidence falls on the Commissioner or the ALJ, not the reviewing court, see *Craig*, 76 F.3d at 589; *Laws*, 368 F.2d at 642; *Snyder*, 307 F.2d at 520, and the ALJ must carefully weigh treating physician opinions and explain the weight he assigns to the various opinions, see 20 C.F.R. § 404.1527; SSR 96-2p, 1996 WL 374188, at *4 (July 2, 1996). In this case, the ALJ failed to note conflicts in the evidence and failed to discuss how he resolved conflicts in the evidence and weighed the relevant medical evidence.

Functional Limitations

The RFC assessment must identify the Plaintiff's functional limitations or restrictions and assess his or her work-related abilities on a function-by-function basis, including the functions in paragraphs (b), (c), and (d) of 20 C.F.R. 404.1545. See SSR 96-8p, 61 Fed. Reg. at 34,475. Only after this identification and assessment may RFC be expressed in terms of the exertional levels of work: sedentary, light, medium, heavy, and very heavy. *Id.* Here, the ALJ's decision does not contain a function-by-function analysis of any physical demand of work activity on a regular and continuing basis or any discussion of how he determined Plaintiff was capable of each functional requirement of medium work, although it appears there may have been some question as to whether Plaintiff could perform the walking requirement of medium work. At the hearing, the ALJ stated to Plaintiff, "I don't think you could have a job where you had to walk a lot." [R. 36.] However, as stated, an Administration policy statement indicates that jobs at the medium exertion level require standing and walking most of the workday, SSR 83-14, 1983 WL 31254, at *5, and the ALJ's decision contains no discussion as to how or why he ultimately determined Plaintiff could perform medium work. Thus, in addition to failing to comply with SSR 96-8p, the ALJ's decision does not allow the Court to (1) track the ALJ's reasoning and be assured that all record evidence was considered and (2) understand how the ALJ resolved conflicts in the evidence. See *Mellan*, 2009 WL 2777653, at *13. For these reasons, the Court is unable to conclude the ALJ's determination is supported by substantial evidence and recommends the case be remanded for further administrative action.

Plaintiff's Remaining Arguments

Because the Court finds the ALJ's failure to explain his RFC assessment, including how he weighed and resolved conflicts in the evidence, is a sufficient basis to remand the case to the Commissioner, the Court declines to specifically address Plaintiff's additional allegations of error by the ALJ. However, upon remand, the Commissioner should take into consideration Plaintiff's remaining allegations of error, including Plaintiff's allegations that the ALJ failed to properly evaluate Plaintiff's credibility and properly analyze Plaintiff's ability to perform his past relevant work.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Wherefore, based on the foregoing, it is recommended that the decision of the Commissioner be REVERSED and the case be REMANDED to the Commissioner pursuant to sentence four of 42 U.S.C. § 405(g) for further administrative action consistent with this recommendation.

IT IS SO RECOMMENDED.

s/Jacquelyn D. Austin
United States Magistrate Judge

August 7, 2013
Greenville, South Carolina